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## **Spread life sciences jobs to advance Smart Growth**

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Imagine combining downtown Bethesda and the National Institutes of Health. Then take away the two Metrorail stations. Now drop that and its traffic into an already congested suburban residential area. This is what the Montgomery County Planning Board has recommended in the Gaithersburg West Master Plan — now before the County Council — for the county's Life Sciences Center, an area that includes Shady Grove Adventist Hospital. Yes, the council should approve expansion of the center, but not to a level that creates unbearable traffic congestion for tens of thousands of nearby residents, pass-through drivers, and commuters to the center from across the county.

There is a win-win solution — one that advances the vital goal of growing a world-class life sciences sector in a way that advances Smart Growth and avoids world-class traffic: distribute life sciences and similarly attractive job capacity in suitable locations across the county, including in the east (the Georgia Avenue and Route 29 corridors), which has ample housing but has long needed more high-paying jobs. The present Gaithersburg West Master Plan allows for 38,000 jobs, far more than the existing 22,000. The Planning Board recommends allowing 60,000 (life sciences and other jobs). Recently, council members Valerie Ervin (D-Silver Spring/Takoma Park/Wheaton) and Nancy Navarro (D-east county) wrote to the Planning Board, noting the pressing need for more bioscience jobs in eastern Montgomery County.

The Council of Governments' 2009 forecast of future job growth — which incorporates the Gaithersburg West proposal — projects employment growth will shrink along Georgia Avenue and Route 29, at the Wheaton, Twinbrook, Rockville and Shady Grove Metro station areas, and along the Purple Line (Bethesda and Silver Spring Central Business Districts, East Silver Spring, and Takoma Park). The projected loss of future jobs in eastern Montgomery is more than 6,600, and in the county's urban ring (southern Montgomery) more than 8,900.

As David Hauck, chair of the county's Sierra Club chapter, testified at the plan's public hearing, "This would undermine two of the county's Smart Growth goals ... to direct development to Metro station areas ... (and) to direct more job growth to the eastern part of the county to correct the current jobs/housing imbalance — more jobs than housing in the west and more people than jobs in the east county."

The council needs to address this issue by modifying the proposed Gaithersburg West Plan.

The Maryland Department of Transportation has expressed serious concerns about the plan. In a Sept. 15 letter to the council, the department wrote that the jobs/housing imbalance proposed (22,000 additional jobs versus 5,200 additional housing units) would contribute to longer auto-dependent commutes. "As a result of this imbalance, our concern is that employees have little choice but to commute in from areas throughout the Washington area." They predicted "severe congestion" on local roads, and added, "We

suggest that this impact can be reduced if the gap between households and jobs were more in balance with one another."

Although the Corridor Cities Transitway is planned to traverse the Life Sciences Center, the Planning Board expects only 12 percent of center workers would use it to commute, and projects 18 percent would walk, bike, take other transit or carpool. The great majority of the tens of thousands of additional workers would drive alone.

Residents want traffic congestion addressed, and certainly not worsened by council action. A recent survey for the Council of Governments found that 58 percent of Montgomery County residents polled ranked traffic/transportation as the county's most significant long-term problem. The Planning Board states in the plan that "... by suburban standards, area roads (in the center) are congested ..." Inexplicably, the board recommends weakening traffic standards for future development in the center.

The council's decision on the Gaithersburg West Plan will affect the future quality of life not only in communities around the Life Sciences Center, but in eastern and southern Montgomery County also. Since most of our county's future residents will live in communities that exist now, the council must be a good steward of these communities while fostering high-quality development in appropriate locations. With the Gaithersburg West Plan, the council has an opportunity and an obligation to do both.

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The writer, a Democrat representing Gaithersburg and Rockville, is president of the Montgomery County Council. The views expressed are his own.